

Features

10/31/2025

Digging the Dark

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Illicium floridanum

Deep shade, and in some cases dry shade, are two of the toughest conditions in the garden to establish plants. Many popular garden plants simply won't tolerate the low light or moisture competition found beneath mature trees or along shaded foundations. However, with the right selections it's possible to create a thriving, beautiful garden, even in the darkest corners of your landscape.

Through the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, there's the Gold Medal Plant Program. Each year six trees, shrubs, perennials and vines are selected for ornamental interest, ease of cultivation, ecological benefits and other attributes. One of the 2026 recipients is *Daphniphyllum macropodum*. *Daphniphyllum*s thrive in USDA Zones 6 or above, and they're characterized by large shiny, evergreen, rhododendron-like leaves with an attractive pink petiole. In their youth, they're a broad spreading shrub, but can also become tree-like, reaching 30-ft. tall at maturity. While deer browsing has been reported in densely deer populated areas, it's

proven to be mostly deer resistant. It can thrive in deep, dark shade and can grow at the base of large trees like white pines (*Pinus strobus*) and Norway Spruce (*Picea abies*), which can often be very dry.

The Florida anise tree thrives in deep, dark wooded areas. This broadleaved evergreen is native to Southeastern areas of the U. S. In most garden situations, *Illicium floridanum* is a multi-stemmed shrub and the foliage has a very pungent smell that repels deer. The flowers are very interesting, maroon and somewhat star-like. Halley's Comet is a good pinkish-red selection. Pink Frost has white-and-green variegated leaves. Alba has spider-like white flowers.

Evergreens & Groundcovers

Another excellent group of broadleaved evergreens for the deep shade is the tea olive, *Osmanthus heterophyllus*. Tea olives look like hollies with dark green, evergreen leaves that have spines like a holly. Another added attribute is that in September/October, they're covered in tiny white, very fragrant flowers. There are many cultivars, including Gulf tide, which can reach over 10-ft. tall and a nearly equal spread to make an excellent evergreen hedge. Sasaba is smaller in stature and has extremely spiny leaves; it would be a good shrub where a barrier is needed. Goshiki is a selection with soft yellow and green variegation. It doesn't grow as quickly as Gulf tide, but ultimately will reach 10-ft. tall, and is a good shrub for variegation and adding some bright colors to a dark shaded garden.



Daphniphyllum macropodum

An excellent groundcover for the deep shade is the sweet box, *Sarcococca hookeriana* var. *humilis*. This sub-shrub only reaches about 12-in. tall and spreads by underground stems. The narrow leaves are dark green and shiny. It's called sweet box because of the flowers that appear in late winter to early spring that are intensely fragrant. Like other members of the boxwood family, they're resistant to deer browsing. Fragrant Valley is a superior selection.



Cercis canadensis Appalachian Red

More Foliage & Flowering Options

In the wild, many of the large leaf native magnolias thrive in deep shade. Because they're grown more for their foliage than their sporadic flowers, they can be used for the large, bold and tropical-like foliage. The Ashe magnolia (*Magnolia macrophylla* subsp. *ashei*) is native to the panhandle of Florida. While this is a native Florida plant, it's hardy in Chicago and down to USDA Zone 5. This magnolia is characterized by large leaves up to 18-in. long that are dark green above with silver cast on the underside. Typically, in May, it has sporadically borne very large white fragrant flowers with a purple splotch in the center. At maturity, the Ashe magnolia reaches 20- to 25-ft. tall.

For exceptional flowering in deep shade redbuds (*Cercis canadensis*) are a good choice. In the wild, redbuds are an understory tree often growing in dense shade. They're hardy to at least USDA Zone 5. The "Columbus

strain" is a selection that was made for its particular hardiness to be able to withstand winters in Illinois, Wisconsin and other Midwestern states. Redbuds can reach up to 25-ft. tall with an equal spread. Before the leaves emerge, pea-like flowers bloom all along the stems and trunks. The rose-pink flowers always make an impressive display in early spring. In recent years, there's been a mass proliferation of new cultivars, particularly from the resulting hybridization work of Dr. Denny Werner at North Carolina State University. There's a white selection called Alba. Pauline Lily has soft lavender flowers.

Tennessee Pink has bubblegum-pink flowers. Appalachian Red has an abundance of cerise-pink flowers. The Rising Sun has bright pink flowers. As the heart-shaped leaves emerge, they're a bright golden yellow color. Equally impressive in its foliage display is Flamethrower. This quick-growing redbud is characterized by arching branches of vivid leaves that emerge yellow, orange and pink.

Finding highly ornamental plants for deep, dark shade can often be a challenge in the garden. There are many, very ornamental, plants that can grow in these understory conditions, including several that are native and others that are also resistant to deer. With thoughtful selection and careful placement, these resilient shade-loving plants can transform even the most difficult garden spaces into lush and vibrant retreats. **GP**

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